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SUBJECT: ZUBKOV CONFIRMED; HINTS AT CABINET RE-SHUFFLE

REF: MOSCOW 4511 (NOTAL)

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Summary

[1](#)1. (SBU) As expected, Prime Minister-designate Viktor Zubkov was easily confirmed by the Duma after a perfunctory set of questions and speeches September 14. Only the Communist Party, and perhaps some independent deputies, voted against him. Zubkov used the occasion to suggest that a cabinet re-shuffle is in the works. Deputies offered the heads of Minister of Finance Kudrin and of Economic Development Gref for Zubkov's consideration, as well as that of the perennial candidate for early retirement, Minister of Health and Social Development Zurabov. Zubkov agreed only that "it is time for personnel changes." End summary.

Easily Approved

[1](#)2. (SBU) As expected, the Duma September 14 voted overwhelmingly to approve Viktor Zubkov, President Putin's nominee to succeed Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov. The vote was 381 to 47, with 8 deputies abstaining. Zubkov's confirmation followed a ten-minute, lackluster speech by the nominee, two questions from each of the five legislative factions, and stemwinders by faction heads and a representative of the independent deputies.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Zubkov, his voice hoarse and occasionally breaking, used his ten minutes to call, unremarkably, for stable, continued economic and social development, the realization of the national projects, more practical benefits from the oil and gas bonanza, and improving the working of the defense industry. His remarks received only polite applause from the deputies.

Anti-Corruption Crusade

[1](#)4. (SBU) Zubkov's answers to the ten questions posed were short for a politician, confirmed that he is not a compelling speaker, and demonstrated, not surprisingly, only an occasional good grasp of the facts. Two subjects seemed to galvanize Zubkov: corruption and a possible cabinet re-shuffle. His reference to the former in his speech amounted to little more than the hope that revenue generated by "pushing the economy out of the shadows," could produce more income for the pension fund. Later, in answering a question, from For A Just Russia's Gennadiy Gudkov, Zubkov

waxed (for him) eloquent. He called for the passing of a law on corruption, saying he had participated in a team which had drafted a corruption bill. He also lobbied for the creation of an agency, like the National Anti-Terrorism Committee, to attack corruption. Elsewhere during his appearance, Zubkov equated corruption in government ranks with rank unprofessionalism, and indicated he would be on the attack once confirmed. Still, Zubkov said, "repressive measures alone are not sufficient," and he called on "society to fight corruption."

Possible Cabinet Changes

15. (SBU) Although he did not suggest an impending cabinet re-shuffle in his prepared remarks, Zubkov did not shy away from the subject when asked. After United Russia deputy Andrey Isayev slammed Ministers of Housing Yakovlev, Culture and Mass Communications Sokolev, and Health and Social Development Zurabov, Zubkov described the strategy (a nod to Putin) "correct," but its execution "terrible." "We will take steps," Zubkov said. "It is time for personnel changes."

Other deputies, among them the Communist Party's Aleksey Popov also used their time to agitate for the ouster of ministers. In Popov's sights, in addition to Zurabov, were Minister of Finance Kudrin and Minister of Economic Development Gref. At one point Zubkov seemed to endorse Rodina deputy Yuriy Savelyev's suggestion that Kudrin and Gref were "guilty of many failures." "You are right to ask questions (about them)," he told Savelyev.

Communists Oppose, Zhirinovskiy Opposes Communists

16. (SBU) Communist Party Chairman Zyuganov and the Rodina's Sergey Glotov roundly criticized the current cabinet.

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Zyuganov ended his attack by announcing, as expected, that the Communists would not support Zubkov's candidacy. Glotov reported that Rodina's small faction would abstain. Zyuganov's opposition provoked a scathing attack from the LDPR's Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. Vladimir Vulfovich reviewed the Communists' criminal past in dismissing their opposition to Zubkov. "You are saboteurs, not revolutionaries," Zhirinovskiy said and, in a sentence that managed to link his dislike of the West with his hatred of the Communists, Zhirinovskiy dismissed "1917 (as) the first Orange Revolution."

Comment

17. (SBU) As expected, foreign relations did not figure in Zubkov's remarks except indirectly, as when he mentioned the need for Russia to be able to compete in the international arena. Deputies asked no questions about Zubkov's possible presidential aspirations. The best capsule description of the newly-minted Prime Minister of the many attempted during the afternoon session was offered by independent deputy Baburin, who described Zubkov, who has traveled the ranks from the Soviet Union's collective farm system through the Communist Party apparatus to become Prime Minister in a newly resurgent Russia, as "an organic unity of the Soviet and post-Soviet" experience. The weeks and months ahead will show what role that "organic unity" is to play in the succession jigsaw puzzle being assembled by Putin.

18. (SBU) It is difficult to know what to make of Zubkov's comments on possible cabinet changes. The ministers mentioned by assorted deputies have been under attack in the Duma for some time, and Zubkov may have been merely attempting to placate his electorate just minutes before their vote. Some of his comments, however, suggest that a re-shuffle of some sort is in the offing. When it comes, it

may amount to little more than the splitting of ministries like Zurabov's, or it may be of the more sweeping nature suggested in today's hearing.

Burns